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Eco-Archives Across Cultures: Comparative Study of Global Indigenous Narratives

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Abstract

Indigenous repository of knowledge is dense, layered, and multigenerational embodying spiritual, ecological, medicinal, and cultural wisdom accumulated for centuries with observation and interaction with the environment. The knowledge carried by indigenous communities in their narratives strengthens the link between ecology and mankind. Folklore serves as the primary mode of transmission of indigenous knowledge; the collective wisdom and lifestyles of tribal communities is conveyed orally in the form of myths, rituals, folktales, etc. from one generation to other.

Inspired by the tales of Mawphlang Sacred Forests of Khasi Tribes, Apatani tribe's agricultural system and Bhil tribe's unique water conservation practices, the research paper aims to situate Indian folklore within a comparative global frame. Parallels with other indigenous communities globally uncover philosophies that emphasise sustainability, reciprocity, and ecological kinship. Through this comparative study of diverse narratives, the paper intends to highlight the similarities between various indigenous communities' ecological values and sustainability practices.

By employing comparative literary and cultural analysis combined with ecocritical thought, archive and counter-archive theory the study asks: How do these narratives contest anthropocentric exploitation of nature? Through the medium of this study, the paper aims to understand whether these folkloric archives can be used in the contemporary world as a manual for a sustainable future. And, how can the discourse about ecological folklore can be integrated into education and climate activism to create awareness and inspire activism.

Keywords: Indigenous, Folklore, Ecology, Environmental Conservation, Sustainability.

Introduction:

Folklore and myth are the bedrock of a culture. The diverse narratives of epics, folktales, urban

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legends, hymns, songs, etc., offer humanity a framework to understand itself and the world around them further helping in communicating a culture's paradigm. Although in the contemporary digital era myths and folktales have become a forgotten form of narrative, it is imperative to understand the role of these narratives as moral guides rather than mere stories. The rich repository of knowledge and wisdom that these stories encapsulate is vital for preserving cultural identity and to bridge the cultural gap between generations (past, present, and future). These stories about supernatural beings, Gods, communal identity, human struggles, creation and origin of world, etc. helps in making the link to our ancestors and past more tangible. Myths and folklore provide a cultural blueprint encoding how communities interact with elements around them such as nature and environment. These tales are rich in meaning and metaphor, acting as a manual that depicts how man dealt with environment and nature and the conflicts that arose.

In the recent years, the acknowledgement regarding indigenous forms of knowledge has increased, wherein the relationships with the flora and fauna are encouraged and respected, further bringing into focus the crucial role traditional ecological knowledge plays in addressing and rectifying ecological issues (UNESCO, 2023). Mankind's anthropocentric and capitalistic worldview has led to rampant exploitation of nature and its resources. Ethical ecology defies this by advocating for respect and moral responsibility towards all forms of life and shifting towards an eco-centric ethic that focuses on harmony, survival, and most importantly peaceful coexistence. However, it is imperative to note here that since economic and political systems remain largely profit driven focusing on short-term goals such as maximisation of immediate human convenience and resource extraction. Robert Pogue Harrison (1992) in his article argues:

> Ecological concern over forests goes beyond just the forests insofar as forests have now become metonymies for the earth as a whole. What is true for a particular forest's ecosystem is true for the totality of the biosphere. Humanity begins to appear in a new light: as species caught in the delicate and diverse web of a forest-like planetary environment. More precisely, we are beginning to appear to ourselves as a species of parasite which threatens to destroy the hosting organism as a whole. (p. 199)

The decline of ecosystems, climate change, and environmental degradation is the result of decades of ethical and environmental neglect that cannot be restored with mere discussions on sustainability. Sustainable measures require long-term decision making that prioritises reduced resource exploitation and global cooperation consistently. In an era where the world is battling various environmental challenges the preservation and recognition of indigenous knowledge and practices is essential for a sustainable future. Donald Worster (1988) has laid his opinion:

> We are in the midst of global crisis today and for this the failure of our ethical system is responsible as we are not able to realise the impact of our actions through which we have harmed the environment. We have failed to understand the ethical system along with the ways to reform it. Therefore, I am of the opinion that for saving environment we must restructure the practices of all cultures. (p. 11)

Indigenous models emphasize long-term well-being, harmony, and balance contributing effectively to conservation of environment; in contrast modern societies shaped by capitalist ideologies and anthropocentrism prioritise short-term growth at the cost of natural resources causing environmental degradation.

1.1 Defining Eco-Archives and Environmental History

Environmental history is the study of the relationship between mankind and the natural world exploring how the environment has affected human civilisation and how mankind's actions

have affected nature and ecology. Paul Buchholz (2021) mentions in his article, "Environmental history is already a long-established academic subfield that draws on archival research to better understand past imbrications of the social realm and the environment" (p. 112). With rapid industrialisation, growing population and indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources the current ecological crisis was inevitable. Contemporary environmental history started to take shape after the second World War starting from United States of America, spreading to Europe and in the last few decades worldwide. Modern environmental problems are a result of advancing unchecked innovation and commercialisation clashing with traditional environmental ethos at the cost of natural habitat.

The scope of environmental history is widened by the inclusion of indigenous knowledge frameworks, oral and written narratives providing a more complete and holistic understanding of human-nature interplay. Eco-archives and environmental history are complementary fields of study while environmental history studies the relation between man and nature from a scientific lens, eco-archives preserve the same relation through cultural memory in the form of myths, stories, rituals, oral and written narratives. Zapf (2021) in his article states that:

> The ecological function of literature in culture is thus not limited to questions of content or to explicit environmental themes but is a transformative semiotic force which opens up closed circuits of communication by reconnecting mind and body, internal and external environments, the cultural memory to the deep-time memory of culture-nature co-evolution. (p. 127)

1.2 Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and Oral Traditions

Eco-archives are an integral component of sustainability and are synonymous with cultural memory, hence acting as a database to study and explore to better understand indigenous ecological patterns and practices. Lavery and Ross (2023) mention in their article, "It is basic to the efforts of all those who collect or are interested in using data that stock is taken regularly of environmental historical records (i.e. databases) to ensure there is suitably sound information on which to measure trends." (p. 141)

With the meaning and importance of eco-archives now established the paper will aim to focus on the theoretical structures involving ecology, ecocriticism, and memory. Indigenous knowledge is developed among communities for centuries, transmitted from one generation to the other orally. Indigenous knowledge system is distinct in its sociological, cultural and ecological context. These oral traditions encompass a variety of spoken forms such as hymns, songs, stories, songs, chants, myths, poems, legends, etc. Since, this crucial information is passed on orally every version and every narration varies making the cultural repository incredibly diverse and fragile. Indigenous knowledge repository is at a risk of being lost if not transmitted from one generation to another owing to its unique documentation and transmission. It is imperative to note 50-90 percent of the 7000 indigenous languages spoken worldwide and used are predicted to vanish by 2115 (United Nations, 2019).

Bruce Ballenger (1997) in his article asserts that "At the heart of "oral transmission"- and perhaps the writing that grows from oral traditions, as well- is the story and the memory of the story, but also the memories that change the story" (p. 792). The relation that indigenous communities share with nature is reciprocative; for the indigenous communities nature provides means of survival and sustenance and in return these communities protect and become environmental stewards. Gregory D. Smithers (2019) in his journal article asserts that "For the world's indigenous peoples, local ecologies have never simply been resources that make economic growth possible; they are living systems that connect human societies to the global biosphere and a spiritual sense of being" (p. 269). Ecological memory comprises of collective knowledge and cultural practices transferred from one generation to another plays a key role

for indigenous communities as this memory is vital for preservation of cultural heritage and ecological harmony. Nazarea (2006) in her journal article mentions that, "In the field of environmental conservation and landscape restoration, ecologists have come to the conclusion that the ability of ecosystems to rebuild after large-scale natural and human induced disturbances is dependent on "eco logical memory" (p. 328). Eco-archives are the knowledge repositories of ecological memory; hence, it becomes imperative to explore and analyse the theoretical frameworks through which these indigenous archives can be interpreted and studied.

2. Indian Indigenous Eco-Narratives

India is a nation of diverse ethnicities and religions, its tapestry is rich owing to the values of community, tradition, and holistic well-being. In this diverse tapestry, the thread of tribal communities is distinct and exquisite owing to their unique lifestyle and traditions. According to the 2011 census, India has over 700 tribes constituting over 8.6% of the total population, some prominent tribes are Gond, Santhal, Munda, Toto, Bhil, etc. (*List of Tribes in India*, 2025). Tribal population can be found across the country; however, it is concentrated mostly in the central, eastern, and northeastern parts of India.

2.1 Khasi Tribe

One of the most prominent tribal communities of northeast India is the Khasi tribe that inhabits eastern parts of Meghalaya. The Khasis like other indigenous communities have a spiritual relationship with nature and environment; Khasi's believe that man, God, and nature are interconnected with each other and function as one entity. The Khasi philosophy and way of life places nature and environment at its core, Kharbuli (2021) in his journal article states that "Unlike in the west where environmental philosophy emerged as a concern when environment degradation had brought about drastic alterations in the lives of the masses, in the Khasi lives environmental philosophy was there right from the very beginning of life…" (p. 14). The Khasis consider nature as their mother, their folklores and legends personify various elements of nature like hills, caves, rivers, and forests. H.O Mawrie (1981) mentions, "U Khasi U im bad ka mariang bad ka mariang ka im ha u." This line when translated means "A Khasi lives with nature, and the nature lives within him". The Mawlong protected forests is a patch of forest land that falls under the ownership and administration of the Mawlong clan of Mairang township. The Mawlong clan within the Khasi community presents the world with an exceptional model of environmental governance wherein every member of the clan is responsible for taking care of the forest which they do not perceive as resource rather a sacred entity. It is imperative to note here that the relation of the clan with the forest is that of a steward not of an owner. The preservation and protection of the forest have been possible partly due to oral tradition, taboos, and the customary rules that govern the management of the forest. No one is allowed to take anything from the forest, not even a single fallen leaf or twig as the locals believe it can anger the spirit of the forest and, in general brings bad luck.

2.2 Apatani Tribe

Arunachal Pradesh is one of the seven sisters, and is known for its forest resources, diverse tribes, and indigenous knowledge systems. These tribal communities sustain themselves with a variety of shifting agricultural practices that are energy efficient, avoid exploitation of resources, and beneficial to the farmers as well. The Apatanis are one of the 26 major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh who are situated in the Ziro valley and practice wet rice land agro-ecosystems. Rice and fish are the staple food of Apatanis, and as a result they use the most evolved form of wet rice cultivation and an independent technique that helps them rear fish in the same field maximising production, this practice is known as paddy-cum-fish cultivation. Apatani tribe follows a unique form of farming in which rice is integrated with fish and millet

to enhance the economic returns and ensures the optimal use of land resources (Singh and Gupta, 2002). The symbiotic ecosystem that Apatanis foster utilises bamboo traps and nets that helps in catching the fish, while the waste from the fishes serves as fertiliser for the rice paddies. This technique ensure efficiency and promotes ecological harmony, communicating the cordial relationship between Apatani farmers and their environment. It is imperative to note that men and women both work on the fields, labour work is not restricted to one particular gender or family. The families work as one community, they share stories of their origins through their songs, hymns, and legends; at the center of this knowledge repository lies the story of Abo Tanii who led the tribe's people with seeds, tools, and hope towards a valley with gentle soil, streams, and slopes. The story ties the families together, and inspires them to live a life of abundance and in harmony with nature.

2.3 Bhil Tribe

Bhil tribe is one of the largest indigenous communities of India that inhabits western India, including parts of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and in distant parts of Tripura and Bengal. The Bhil community like most indigenous communities is a community largely dependent on agriculture for sustenance; they have a rich cultural repository of traditions and customs. One such unique tradition that Bhil community commemorates is that of 'Halma', Mrs. Amri Devi Ninama (2024), a member of the Gram Swaraj Sangathan mentions that- "Halma is an ancient tradition of our Bhil community. When a person is trapped in a crisis in the village and even after applying all his strength, he cannot get out of that crisis, then he invokes Halma. The people of the village get that person out of trouble by fulfilling their social responsibility of participating in Halma" (Vaagdhara, n.d.). Under the Halma initiative entire villages and communities come together to remove silt and other impurities from the ponds increasing their storage capacity. Through these efforts they aim to cleanse and purify old sources of groundwater and further dig contour trenches to slow down groundwater runoff. They further make collective efforts to maintain kunds and talabs that help in daily agricultural activities and improve water storage systems.

3.0 Global Indigenous Eco-Narratives

The world has approximately 476 million indigenous population who are crucial partners and pioneers in the conservation of environment. A study conducted by the World Bank Group suggests that Indigence Communities' reliance on traditions, customs, knowledge repository and strict rules of governance of nature and environment is an important factor in maintaining world's intricate ecosystems (World Bank, 2025).

3.1 Maori Tribe

New Zealand has some of the world's most exotic and vibrant flora and fauna because of how isolated the islands are from the rest of the world that make up the country. The Maori people are the Indigenous residents of New Zealand; they take pride in their rich cultural knowledge repository that situates nature at its centre. Garth R. Harmsworth (2013) mentions that:

> The traditional Maori world view acknowledged a natural order to the universe; a dynamic system built around the living and the non-living. For Maori the modern use of the terms ecosystem and ecosystem services can be explained through traditional knowledge and the interwoven concepts of whakapapa, mana and kaitiakitanga, and possession of the spiritual qualities of tapu, mauri, and wairua. (p. 276)

The Maori worldview believes that there is unique bond between humans, land, and the natural world that surrounds us; this bond is expressed through 'kaitiakitanga', 'Tiaki' means to protect and the prefix 'kai' means someone who carries out an action. Therefore, 'Kaitiaki' is an

essentially an individual or a designated group of an area that cares and protects a forest or a lake. Kaitiaki act as guardians of natural resources so that there is enough for today and for tomorrow. Their judgement is guided by the knowledge repository that is passed from one generation to other; this knowledge repository holds customs and traditions that are ecologically viable further ensuring retention of information. The notions and practices of kaitiakitanga have developed over generations of use and the active, sustainable guardianship of natural resources. Inter-generational observations and ecological understandings of species interactions and patterns of use, have been accumulated and grounded in the existence of Maori and Indigenous cultures, which are intimately bound to residing in one place for many generations (Cheung, 2008).

3.2 Yoruba Tribe

Yoruba tribe is a West-African ethnic group that inhabits parts of Nigeria, Benin, and Togo. It is one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa. Yoruba knowledge repository is a subset of their religion and it firmly believes in the worldview that human beings are tenants on God's creation that is Earth and it is our duty to coexist peacefully with other entities on the planet both living and non-living. An example of their preservation of religious, cultural, and ecological identity can be observed through their conservation of Osun Osogbo Sacred Grove; the grove is located on the outskirts of southern Nigeria. The grove is seen as holy and pious as it is considered as the dwelling place of Osun, the Goddess of fertility, within the grove one can find beautiful rivers, shrines, sculptures and other symbols of Yoruba culture. The community's traditional responsibilities and cultural rites are carried out through the Ataoja (king) and his council, known as the Osogbo Cultural Heritage Council. Various traditional practices are employed to safeguard the site from threats, including traditional laws, myths, taboos, and customs that forbid activities such as fishing, hunting, poaching, tree felling, and farming (UNESCO World Heritage Convention, 2005). The understanding of a grove untouched by the tribulations of time is understood differently by outsiders and Yoruba tribe; the tribe considers the site as a place of example of Yoruba ideology and a place through which the legends, myths and traditions live on while for the outsiders the place is another site to be preserved.

3.3 Sami Tribe

The Sami indigenous community is one of oldest indigenous community residing in the parts of Northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. The community occupies their own traditional borderless area known as Sapmi. For thousands of years, the Sami community has acted as guardians to nature and its resources; the connection between Sami people and their environment is extraordinary. Their worldview is based on the belief system that all natural elements (hills, mountains, rivers, etc.) and living beings are connected to one another. Sami cultural circles function on the values of stewardship and respect. Their animistic ideals emphasize upon that natural elements have a soul including animals, rocks, rivers etc. The Sami, however, perceive nature as a religious experience. They describe nature in terms of relatedness, where each organism has its place and plays a particular role. Nature's ideal condition, its "balance", should be respected; therefore, a practical consequence is that any engagement with nature should be as minimal as possible (Uddenberg, 2000, p. 142).

4. Eco-archives as Resistance and Contemporary Relevance

Indigenous knowledge encompasses a wide range of narratives, it is however imperative to understand that this knowledge repository is not merely collection of facts, stories, and practices; it is a way of life that imparts ideals of spirituality, community, and ecology. This knowledge system is continuously evolving through observation, transmission from one generation to another, and close observation of nature and its elements. Every indigenous knowledge repository whether local or global reiterates the same values of sustainability,

respect, and safeguarding of delicate ecosystems which are essential for human survival. Indian Indigenous knowledge system stems from the foundational texts that is Vedas and Upanishads that elaborates the role of nature as a provider. However, India is a land of diverse ethnic groups and religious backgrounds and each group has their own set of values and approaches towards conserving nature and environment. Indigenous knowledge is extensive especially in the Indian context as where nature is revered as not only a means for sustenance but the communities fame their livelihoods and way of life around nature and environment.

Upon comparison global indigenous traditions whether among Indian communities or international communities there are certain ecological ideas that are common among cultures. The first and foremost is the relationship with land; land, water, and trees is considered as part of one's kin and the protection of which falls upon respective communities. The other most prominent feature is nature and all its elements are not perceived as 'resources' but sacred, worthy of conservation, worship, and reverence. These ontologies impart the idea of sacred ecology in which care and respect for the environment stems not from fear of an uncertain future but from a moral duty. The indigenous worldview advocates for environmental ethics to be grounded in spiritual-cultural relationships so that the conservation of nature becomes an act of ethical obligation and not merely sustainability ethics.

Indigenous eco-narratives oppose the anthropocentric exploitation of nature by rejecting the capitalist ideology that prioritises profit and economic gain fostered by rapid industrialisation and urbanisation. Instead, indigenous ideologies advance ontologies that believe that the nature with its rivers, hills, land, trees and animals possess rights and deserve our respect. The myths, legends, songs, and symbols are passed on from one generation to other not merely as guidelines but also as reminders that we are co-inhabitants and kin; coexistence with reverence and care is the path. Hence, in the times when the relationship between nature, environment and mankind is worsening the values imparted by indigenous knowledge repository provide a framework for a sustainable future.

4.1 Education and Activism

The integration of environmental ethics with education is of paramount importance in the contemporary era owing to the seriousness of the environmental crisis. Incorporating values of indigenous knowledge into the educational programs can help foster a generation that has a more sincere understanding of nature. Devi (2024) in here journal article asserts that "By combining folklore with modern teaching techniques, teachers may foster a sense of global perspective while helping students connect with their heritage, guaranteeing that traditional knowledge will continue to be useful in tackling issues like social cohesion and climate change." (pp. 1707-1715) Development of cultural and environmental awareness can lead to the future generation moving beyond the role of mere activists to environmental stewards. Embracing of cultural values and indigenous wisdom can be the path to an inclusive and sustainable future.

Conclusion:

This comparative study of indigenous cultures and their ecological practices is imperative in the contemporary times as exploring native cultures can be the key to modern ecological crisis; indigenous worldview provides us with alternative frameworks for sustainable living, reframing human-nature relationships, and encouraging practices that promote harmony, respect, and equitability rather than exploitation. Perhaps, the path to a sustainable world of ecological balance and renewal lies not ahead, but behind us — in the lives and lessons of those who have long lived as the Earth's true custodians.

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Bio-note

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